

Gimme Shelter – in a No Kill shelter, please!

The Startling Truth Behind “Open Door” Sheltering

By Patty Donmoyer

Nathan Winograd, one of the founders of the No Kill movement in San Francisco in 1994, lays out this challenge: “We can fully, completely, and without reservation embrace No Kill as our future. Or we can continue to legitimize the two-pronged strategy of failure: adopt a few and kill the rest. It is a choice which history has thrown upon us. We are the generation that questioned the killing. We are the generation that has discovered how to stop it. Will we be the generation that does?”



Unsurprisingly, the majority of people assume that *all* shelters exist to give the gift of life to animals. However, thanks to the growing influence of the No Kill movement, the public is slowly learning the ugly truth about the amount of killing that takes place at so many of America’s shelters. Still, animal welfare supporters have much to accomplish in the quest to bring light to the hidden practices employed at many of the country’s largest and most well-funded private “open door” shelters.

First, it is important to differentiate private shelters from tax-payer funded municipal shelters, like the local city pound. Government shelters are responsible for the safety of communities and must be “open door,” accepting all stray or unwanted animals. In a No Kill model, the government shelter will be a clearing house, taking in all strays, reuniting lost pets with owners, and transferring the rest to private shelters and rescue groups.

On the other hand, private shelters have a choice to operate as a traditional or a No Kill shelter: whether to accept all animals, regardless of resources, or commit to saving the lives of every one they take in. At traditional shelters, the phrase “open door” is used to convey the friendly message that all animals are welcome, but, in

reality, many (if not most) will exit the doors through which they entered in body bags.

Conversely, No Kill shelters practice “managed admissions,” assuring that all animals taken in are cared for and guaranteed life under the no kill guarantee, but triaging the neediest cases first.

Open Door Kill Shelters

As with any business, institution or nonprofit, every animal shelter has to allocate its resources and manage to financial and capacity limitations. Open door shelters do not manage their populations to those limits and utilize killing as a population management tool. While these traditional open door shelters have the prerogative to do what they wish with the animals in their care, they are rarely transparent about their statistics to the general public. These privately funded shelters are wholly supported by the animal loving community, yet they essentially use donor dollars to duplicate the role that government shelters play in animal control. However, rarely are they upfront about the killing, afraid that the truth would scare away supporters and volunteers.

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No Kill Shelters

Essentially, No Kill shelters guarantee the lives of all animals in their care and only euthanize if an animal is suffering and medical treatment cannot alleviate its condition, or if a dog is truly vicious. “Vicious” does not mean a simple behavior problem but rather a dog that poses a true safety risk to the public. This accounts for a very small number, with most No Kills saving in excess of 95 percent and all No Kills saving more than 90 percent of the pets they take in.

All animals in a No Kill shelter are given needed medical care and necessary behavior training to make them adoptable. The shelter is, in essence, a safe haven, dedicated to preserving life, not ending it.

The most important difference between “open door” and No Kill shelters lies in how intake is managed. Much like a hospital for humans – if 1,000 beds are the hospital’s financial and physical capacity, the hospital will not take in 2,000 patients and kill the excess. They will triage and take in the neediest, most urgent cases and work with the public to treat all less urgent cases over time.

* A No Kill animal shelter works the same way, having an honest dialogue with the public to help solve each individual’s need. The dog whose guardian died or lost his home to foreclosure or eviction will be prioritized over the golden retriever whose guardian’s daughter has allergies. Waiting a few weeks is sometimes required if the owner wants to guarantee the life of his pet. Transparency is also critical to help inform the public about the plight of homeless animals, arming them to become a part of the solution.

* Christie Keith, a journalist for the San Francisco Examiner, writes: “Dear kill shelters: please close your open doors.” Keith says, “If one more shelter defends their kill rate by proudly pointing out that they are ‘open door,’ I’m going to scream. I think continuing to take in animals you have no room for is foolish and immoral, and 10 times more so when you turn around and kill them.”



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Translating the Disguised Language at “Open Door” Kill Shelters

The truth of massive killing at “open door” shelters is frequently disguised from the public, donors and volunteers. Often, such shelters encourage the public to bring them their animals by making dishonest claims of “finding a home for every adoptable pet” or “having no time or space limits.” Yet, on average, 40 to 70 percent of pets taken in are killed. Here’s a translation guide:

“We find a home for all adoptable pets.”

The question to ask, is what is the criteria for a pet to be “adoptable”? A scratch on the nose, too many black dogs in the shelter, a common upper respiratory infection, being too young (under eight weeks), being too old (over six years of age), being too shy or failing a temperament test that has no scientific grounds are examples of justifications used at “open door” shelters to excuse the killing. Of course, pet owners do not think their pet is unadoptable, so they bring their pet to the “humane” society to find a new home.

“We have no limits of time or space.”

While this might sound like a No Kill shelter, “open door” shelters make these statements, but they only count the pets that make it into their kennels, not every animal that comes through their open doors. Making it to the kennels is the hard part and a matter of life or death. In fact, often the owners are still in the parking lot when their pets are being killed in the shelter. By operating this way, volunteers never see the pets that are killed. Shelters also manipulate statistics to show large numbers of “owner consent euthanasia,” which was in the fine print that pet guardians signed when surrendering their pets, considering it a separate line item and not including it in their publicly released data.

Warning Signs: Beware of shelters that restrict volunteers from entering areas of their building.

Get the Facts: To investigate whether your shelter is truly No Kill, ask “What guarantees do you give *all* your animals?” “What is your exact criteria for euthanasia?” “Do you adopt out senior pets?” “Do you treat for ringworm, heartworm and parvo, all common diseases in shelters?” Look to see how many senior pets are on the adoption floor. Does the shelter publish or post its shelter data of all animals coming in?